

# Implementing chaos.

Some notes on *Il dettaglio*

*e l'infinito*. Roth, Yehoshua

and Salter (“Detail and infinity.

Roth, Yehoshua and Salter”)

by Luca Alvino

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c r i t i c s :

Luca Alvino, *Il dettaglio e l'infinito*. Roth, Yehoshua e Salter (Rome: Castelvecchi, 2018)

Luca Alvino<sup>1</sup>, as a writer, is sensitive to details, so the word “detail” in the title of his last critical work comes as no surprise. *Il dettaglio e l'infinito* is a collection of short essays, dedicated to three writers who are deeply original in their poetics, themes, atmospheres, political commitment, but move on the common ground of attention to chaos and the *minutiae* of human existence. Philip Roth, Abraham Yehoshua and James Salter, in the author’s opinion, belong to a group of narrators who do not deny the need for transcendent constructions, categories and taxonomies to which our scattered, unordered reality can be traced back to, in order to favor its

<sup>1</sup> Luca Alvino was born in 1970 in Rome, where he lives and works to this day. He graduated in Italian Literature, and he is known as an essayist, translator, and poet. In 1998, he released *Il poema della leggerezza* (“The poem of lightness”), published by Bulzoni: a monograph on Gabriele d’Annunzio’s *Alcyone*, where the poet presents experiences, smells, sounds, visuals, and flavors of Tuscanian summers. Alvino is a member of the editorial staff of «Nuovi Argomenti», for which he writes critical essays, and a review of contemporary Italian poetry and poetic translation; he also contributes on a regular basis to the cultural blog «Minima & Moralia» (<https://www.minimaetmoralia.it/wp/>). In 2021 he published his latest literary work, the poetic collection *Cento sonetti indie* (“A hundred indie sonnets”), by Interno Poesia.

systematization by man; at the same time, however, these three authors reject any delusional paradigm of a universe regulated by order, and focus not on the “vertical” pursuit of concepts such as the eternal or the infinite – concepts that are in themselves distant, elusive, and watered down in the ocean of abstract thought on a metaphysical level – but on a “horizontal” investigation carried out with disenchanting clarity, anchored in experience, based on the detection of details conceived in a dynamic fashion, nestled in the tangible concreteness and chaos of planet Earth.

Luca Alvino writes in Italian, and makes use of the word *dettaglio* which, however, has two Polish equivalents: *szczegół* and *detal*. These two terms are almost synonyms, but not entirely: there’s a slight difference to pinpoint, especially by considering the use of the Polish word *detal* in the fields of art and architecture. *Szczegół* is more general, it is a detail in its broadest sense; one would describe something *szczegółowo* by listing everything that seems relevant to them in a particular context – a good example of this would be an eyewitness reporting a car accident to the police. A “detailed” description in this sense strives to be thorough, complete, and it’s often prompted by practical need. *Detale*, on the other hand, are not necessarily game-changing details, those on which the reconstruction of the dynamics of the accident would depend. They are minor elements, captured for whatever reason by the lens of momentary perception, which contribute to creating an atmosphere, revealing flashes of fleeting, and yet fully developed mini-worlds, plunged into the immanence of things, ready to show themselves only to those who seek to see them. Back to our road accident scenario, such *detale* could be well represented, for instance, by a flicker of golden hair behind a window of the crashed car; by a green-white-red sticker attached to the rear windshield; by a baby car seat, empty, placed right next to the driver – a young man, who died instantly in the crash. One particularly interested in details would wonder who these people were, and how fortunate that the baby was not on board that day! From time to time the detail (*detal*) becomes a catalyst for stories, thoughts, emotions, analogies; empowered merely by being noticed, it takes on further meanings: it turns into a symbol of a whole existential condition. This is how, according to Alvino, we can catch glimpses of infinity through the pages of Roth, Yehoshua and Salter.

Therefore, the three authors’ goal, pursued through the above-mentioned “horizontal” investigation (i.e., the obstinate pursuit of these *detale*), consists in dismantling the greatest systems, disrupting our most trusted and familiar grids of thoughts – those we have come up with in a whole lifetime of persevering, as well as natural categorization of the universe – pointing out flaws and forcing us to finally face diversity; not merely in order to accept it as a reality that is distinct from us, but to allow it to change us from within, to have an influence on our lives. Roth, Yehoshua and Salter’s literature is a call to *implement chaos*. Alvino highlights how this attitude is consistently reflected the three writers’ prose.

For Philip Roth, contamination can’t be disregarded: one who rejects confrontation with the world, out of fear of unsought change, runs the risk of becoming an *unanticipated self* (“imprevisto se stesso”)<sup>2</sup>, that is – one who refuses to partake in the flow of history, crystallizes in a form that would otherwise be momentary, and “no longer belongs to the world of the

<sup>2</sup> Alvino L., *Il dettaglio e l’infinito. Roth, Yehoshua e Salter* (Rome: Castelvecchi, 2018), 36.

living”<sup>3</sup>. This concept echoes Luigi Pirandello and his fortunate metaphor of life as boiling lava, which however risks solidifying into a “form” at any given moment, turning into rock, cold and still, and thus losing any attitude to trans-formation, any openness to the dialectic of change, to a fertile succession of unforeseen events, conflicts, and opportunities, albeit traumatic, for growth. In Pirandello’s thought, “forms” constitute – first and foremost – masks, which can be put on and taken off, to determine the way we look in front of other people and have an influence on their ideas about us. Nevertheless, what Roth seems to be telling us is that a mask can be worn in front of the self as well, every time we envision ourselves like monoliths – pretending to be immune to confrontation and phobically avoiding an idea of weakness that springs from even just a theoretical possibility of changing one’s mind.

The Rothian literature Alvino examines in his essays also lets us have a taste of the immediate (as in, *non-mediated*) relationship that children establish with reality: free and devoid of those grids of thoughts that are built upon experience, they approach the world with the freshest eyes and a knack for noticing details that is bound to fade away as they grow up. Roth guides his readers through the process of getting to know (“conoscere”) a multifaceted reality, studded with *minutiae* that we, as adults, are used to simply recognize (“ri-conoscere”: it literally means “to get to know again”) without focusing on it, hardly ever dwelling on what is not essential to everyday life. Roth engages with this idea of infinity in a compelling fashion, proceeding by enumeration and accumulation of details; he also shows a liking for adjectives, which he exploits to compensate for any lack of descriptive power on the part of the noun, edging nearer to an increasingly effective rendering of the ultimately elusive mutability of the immanent.

Abraham Yehoshua uses art, music, and the cathartic experiences that they manage to unleash, to emphasize his conception of beauty as an actual negentropic (that is: working in a way that is opposite to natural entropy) miracle, a stunning and unexpected manifestation of order which requires effort, care, and energy consumption to assert itself, and last over time; in Alvino’s words, therefore, “it links back to the transcendental, to the conviction that necessity, indeed, is actively at work behind chaos, channeling nonsense into the reassuring framework of a project”<sup>4</sup>. To understand Yehoshua’s thought, one should not overlook his take on the Jewish people. It looks like the Jews viewed themselves as one nation exclusively in the diaspora, and “the history of Israel appears to consist in a perpetual flight from rigid and pre-established borders, as if divine election had relegated it to a state of continuous migration”<sup>5</sup>. In this sense, the process of defining cultural identity (which can’t rely merely on geographical coordinates when it comes to the Jewish people) and the concept of confrontation, connection, fertile contamination, are of key importance. Alvino states, with Yehoshua, that the identity perspective is inherently narrow, and that only *connection* can prevent a sense of belonging from becoming caught up in self-centered withdrawal. In the novel *Fuoco amico* (“Friendly Fire”), the call to retranslate the Bible from English into Hebrew embodies this openness to contamination, which is vital to avoid the transformation of a whole people

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 93.

into an *unanticipated self* as Roth would call it: the act of retranslating the Bible from English into Hebrew implements the chaos of confrontation, the fertility of connection, the instability of change.

James Salter is defined by Alvino as an “extraordinary master of the art of zooming in”<sup>6</sup>. According to Salter, details are “the only tangible aspect of reality, the accidents in which the complex phenomenology of humanness manifests itself”<sup>7</sup>. Every detail is grasped in its immediacy, brushed on the page in separate strokes that show an impressionistic taste, and dilated to the point of almost freezing it in time; and such small, cozy, self-referential worlds, fleeting yet complete, just like the many distinct frames of an old silent movie, are faced by the overwhelming force of an inevitable fate, cursed with a dark, incongruous, chaotic design, which can only be understood through the “inessentiality of each individual”<sup>8</sup>, the insignificant *minutiae* behind which infinity itself has its hiding spot<sup>9</sup>. Consistently with such a disturbing background of chiaroscuro hues, Salter plays with the reader, scrambling information on purpose to lead them astray. He doesn’t strive to clarify misunderstandings, nor does he care about being mistrusted as an author: he just wants to shed some flickering light on a multiple, confusing, and elusive reality, that won’t submit to the dominion of logical reasoning. “Reality is never made simpler, not even when broken down into frames; (...) on the contrary, it is pursued and captured in its entirety, with the passionate greed and eagerness of the enthusiast who yearns to possess the whole thing. *All that is*,”<sup>10</sup> Alvino concludes, quoting the title of James Salter’s latest novel with its refined and disruptive erotic charge.

Alvino’s prose is transparent and fluid. Even without having read anything he examines, the reader would be able to follow and appreciate his analysis to the end, thanks to his precise language, his clear arguments, and his authentic love for literature that every page of the book exudes. *Il dettaglio e l’infinito* is just as compelling as a great novel, as much as one’s allowed to say something like this about literary criticism. Through continuous references to the texts and the use of quotes to provide examples, Alvino gets to the point by letting his readers identify the elements he speaks of in the quotes themselves, to better understand their value according to the analysis. Moreover, in a subtle yet effective way, the reader is invited to apply these ideas not just to other authors, but even to different art forms, while also catching a glimpse of an alternative and new approach to the world as human beings: a suggestion to *implement chaos* in the everyday life.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 139.

# KEYWORDS

Luca Alvino, Philip Roth, Abraham Yehoshua, James Salter, Luigi Pirandello, *il dettaglio*, *l'infinito*, detail, infinite, infinity, Jews, Jewish history, Bible, Ebrei, storia ebraica, Friendly Fire, All That Is

JAN BŁOŃSKI

**metacriticism**

*literary criticism*

**ABSTRACT:**

*Il dettaglio e l'infinito* by Luca Alvino is a collection of short critical essays dedicated to three famous novelists, Ph. Roth, A. Yehoshua and J. Salter, who devote their creative effort, according to Alvino, to chaos and the *minutiae* of human existence. They reject any delusional paradigm of a universe governed by order, instead focusing their narrative attention on the flickering dynamism of existence, unordered in all its manifestations. Luca Alvino's prose is transparent and fluid, and his work offers not only a precise and clear analysis of the literature examined, but also more or less occasional hints that encourage the reader to apply the same reasoning to other authors and arts other than literature, eventually suggesting glimpses of an alternative way of approaching the world surrounding us and its expression.

## Roland Barthes

### THE PLEASURE OF READING

#### NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

Chiara Taraborrelli – (born 1994, Guardiagrele, Italy, Abruzzo) is a full-time PhD student at the Faculty of ‘Artes Liberales’, University of Warsaw. She is interested in contemporary Italian and Polish literature. She is currently working on a dissertation on the presence and impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in Italian fiction and creative nonfiction, analysed with the tools of Narrative Medicine. She teaches Italian as a foreign language. She has published a monograph (UW Publishing House, 2022) on the Polish reception of Dante: *Un Dante polacco. Saggio sulla ricezione della figura e dell’opera dantesca in Polonia, dal Quattrocento a Miłosz* (Polish Dante. *Recepcja postaci i twórczości Dante w kulturze polskiej od wieku XV po Miłosz*). She made her debut as a writer in 2021 with the book *Mesarthim Arietis*.